

ARTICLE

The synthetic *a priori*. Rejoinder to Linsbichler

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Abstract

Linsbichler is a gifted economist and philosopher. He delves mightily and thoroughly into the difficult thickets of basic praxeology, the methodology of the Austrian school of economics. Not content with merely probing the meaning and importance of the synthetic *a priori*, he pushes further into the very justification of this foundational element of Austrianism. I learned a lot from reading this splendid essay, most of which I enthusiastically agree. However, there are a few divergences between the two of us, and the present paper is devoted to exploring them. My procedure in this response is one of mentioning numerous quotations from the author, interspersed with my own comments and reactions. That is because I greatly appreciate this gifted economist's contribution to Austrian methodology.

What are the specifics? One error is that he does accurately distinguish between analytic, empirical, and synthetic *a priori*. Another is his misunderstanding of "human action". My debating partner opines that Mises (1998) merely suggests that human beings act. In actual point of fact in the of this latter author, that is the very title of his most famous book, and contains the very core of praxeological economics. Then Linsbichler fails to accurately distinguish between mere behavior and human action. Further there is a dispute over the source of ideas. My learned colleague maintains it is empirical. I demur. He is of the opinion that empirical criticisms can be relevant to praxeological findings. I attempt to correct him on this matter. He takes the position that something can be "mildly aprioristic". I demonstrate that this concept is an all or none phenomenon; no gradations.

Keywords: tautology, empiricism, synthetic *a priori*, purposefulness, economic methodology, Austrian economics, praxe

As an Austrian economist, I am grateful to Linsbichler (Linsbichler 2024). In my view, this should apply to all of my fellow praxeologists.¹ Before reading this very important contribution to our discipline, if I had thought about this issue, which I had not, I would have thought that there was nothing more to say about the synthetic *a priori*. Thanks to him, I have now been disabused of this erroneous notion of mine. I think this brilliant author makes some very telling and important points, many of which I go along with, and from which I have learned. However, I find I cannot go along with him 100% of the time. The present paper explores some of the divergences between him and myself.

As I was taught at my mentor's [Murray N. Rothbard] knee, Austrian economics is predicated upon the synthetic *a priori* insight. There are certainly claims that are not tautologies,

or analytic, but, rather, synthetic, in that they pertain to the real world and are thus not mere definitions. Rather, they are necessarily true. They are synthetic *a priori* statements.

Hoppe (Hoppe 1995) offers a few examples:

Whenever two people A and B engage in a voluntary exchange, they must both expect to profit from it. And they must have reverse preference orders for the goods and services exchanged so that A values what he receives from B more highly than what he gives to him, and B must evaluate the same things the other way around.

Or consider this: Whenever an exchange is not voluntary but coerced, one party profits at the expense of the other.

Or the law of marginal utility: Whenever the supply of a good increases by one additional unit, provided each unit is regarded as of equal serviceability by a person, the value attached to this unit must decrease. For this additional unit can only be employed as a means for the attainment of a goal that is considered less valuable than the least valued goal satisfied by a unit of such good if the supply were one unit shorter.

Or take the Ricardian law of association: Of two producers, if A is more productive in the production of two types of goods than is B, they can still engage in a mutually beneficial division of labor. This is because overall physical productivity is higher if A specializes in producing one good which he can produce most efficiently, rather than both A and B producing both goods separately and autonomously.

Or as another example: Whenever minimum wage laws are enforced that require wages to be higher than existing market wages, involuntary unemployment will result.

Or as a final example: Whenever the quantity of money is increased while the demand for money to be held as cash reserve on hand is unchanged, the purchasing power of money will fall (Hoppe 1995, pp.14–15).

What, then, are we to make of Linsbichler statement to the effect that: “conventionalism² avoids the charge of extreme apriorism by construing the fundamental axiom of praxeology as analytic instead of synthetic” (Linsbichler 2024, p.43).

First of all, there is no need to “avoid [...] the charge of extreme apriorism” the view of Murray Rothbard. Rather, all praxeologists may embrace it. Second, the fundamental axiom of praxeology is neither analytic *a priori* nor synthetic *a posteriori*. The former is a tautology of the sort “Bachelors are unmarried men”. This tells us nothing about the real world, whether anyone is married or not. It only indicates how we define the words “married” and “bachelor”. It is necessarily true that no bachelor is married. This cannot be tested or falsified. Second, “synthetic” is an empirical claim, such as “it is now raining”. This tells us about the real world, alright, but is not necessarily true. It can be tested and falsified, when it is a sunny day. Austrian economics, or praxeology, consists of a series of synthetic *a priori* states of the sort offered by Hoppe which both pertain to reality, and, are necessarily true.

Next consider this statement of Linsbichler’s:

Explications of the overly short “man acts” identify its content along the following lines: human individuals and only human individuals (as opposed to viruses, planets, or social classes) at least sometimes behave purposefully, i.e. they choose goals and apply means they subjectively consider expedient to attain these goals on the basis of their beliefs. Strictly speaking, the way Mises and other Austrian economists apply the fundamental axiom only suggests that human individuals act and none of the other known types of objects act. In case we encounter intelligent aliens, praxeologists might reconsider the “and only human individuals” clause (Linsbichler 2024, pp.44–45).

I maintain, in contrast, that the way Mises (Mises 1998) and Rothbard (Rothbard 1962) and other Austrians “apply the fundamental axiom” does far more than “suggest that human individuals act”. This is an integral part and parcel of the entire enterprise. Nor is the claim made that *only* people can engage in action, as opposed to mere behavior. Certainly, when and if intelligent aliens come visit us in their spaceships, no Austrian will have any difficulty in ascribing action³ to them.

Saith our author: “Strictly speaking, the fundamental axiom is of no help in ascertaining whether a certain human behavior is merely behavior or an action either” (Linsbichler 2024, p.45). True enough. The fundamental axiom, there is such a thing as human action, cannot itself make this determination. Needed is some aspect of *Verstehen*, or human intelligence to decide upon this matter. But the same goes for the law of non-contradiction, excluded middle, or any of the other basis building blocks, foundations, of logic. They, alone, cannot decide whether or not something is coherent. They can be the basis upon which such a decision is made, but the “decider” has to be a reasonably intelligent person.

Our author maintains that “experience is not the source or origin of ideas for theories” (Linsbichler 2024, p.47). I say, in contrast, “different strokes for different folks. Or, to be more technical about this matter: *De gustibus non disputandum*”. Also, in a similar manner, the source or origin of ideas is very subjective. Some people get new ideas while they are asleep, in the form of a dream; most of us, while awake. Some while being a couch potato, others while engaging in physical activity. I don’t think it is reasonable to ascribe any one “source or origin” of ideas for all people.

Linsbichler’s next foray is this: “[...] extreme apriorism which immunizes large parts of theory from empirical criticisms, has become highly suspect in the development of philosophy of science and, with some time lag, also among economists [...]” (Linsbichler 2024, p.47). I regard this as an understatement of the year. “Highly suspect,” nothing. Far worse, Austrian economists are denigrated as “cultists” for claiming that basic praxeological truths cannot be tested any more than can the Pythagorean Theorem. For example, states Krugman (Krugman 2013): “Austrian economics very much has the psychology of a cult. Its devotees believe that they have access to a truth that generations of mainstream economists have somehow failed to discern; they go wild at any suggestion that maybe they’re the ones who have an intellectual blind spot. And as with all cults, the failure of prophecy — in this case, the prophecy of soaring inflation from deficits and monetary expansion — only strengthens the determination of the faithful to uphold the faith” (Krugman 2013). Here is Samuelson’s (Samuelson 1964) evaluation of Austrian economics: “I tremble for the reputation of my subject” (Samuelson 1964, p.736). Rosen (Rosen 1997) asks if there are any gains to be made

from trade (interaction between) Austrian and mainstream economics, and answers very strongly in the negative. These critics cannot seem to understand that there are *a priori* claims “out there” that cannot possibly be refuted by any empirical evidence, and yet are not tautologies.⁴

Linsbichler is entire correct, in his own understated manner, when he writes: “[...] since the standard view maintains that praxeology depends on extreme apriorism, philosophers and economists have condemned praxeological methodology as well as economic claims based on praxeological research” (Linsbichler 2024, p.48). He and I, however, diverge from one another when he opines: “Only the fundamental axiom is *a priori* and very little is implied by the fundamental axiom without additional premises” (Linsbichler 2024, p.48). To the contrary, there are numerous synthetic *a priori* statements in Austrian economics⁵; these are by no means limited to the foundational axiom that man acts.

Linsbichler’s next bite at the apple is this: “Praxeology in Mises’s tradition faces two problems: (i) if it is extremely aprioristic as most interpretations hold, then it is considered untenable in light of contemporary philosophy of science” (Linsbichler 2024, p.49). There is a quick and easy response to this “problem”: contemporary philosophy of science is out to lunch; it is mistaken from the get go. I don’t consider it a problem that “contemporary philosophy of science” diverges from praxeology and is thus mistaken.

Here is his next critique: “(ii) Mises’s writings seem to allow for radically different interpretations as to how he attempts to justify praxeology and consequently how extreme his apriorism is” (Linsbichler 2024, p.49). Yes, I acknowledge, there are several and diverging accounts for what might be called “meta-praxeology”: justifying the entire enterprise, categorizing it⁶, accounting for it, looking at its psychological predispositions. However, about praxeology itself, surely a more important issue, there can be little doubt as to its veracity, at least not any emanating from the present quarter.

I think Linsbichler goes off the rails when he “[...] proposes a conventionalist defense of analytic praxeology, first embedded in a broader reconstruction of Mises’s methodological views [...] and later more focused and detailed on conventionalist praxeology [...] The vital step is to construe the fundamental axiom as analytic instead of synthetic *a priori*” (Linsbichler 2024, p.49). No, no, no, “analytic” is tautologous. To be sure, the synthetic *a priori* statement resembles the analytic: it is necessarily true, cannot be tested, only illustrated. But, it also has nothing to do with empirical reality. This construction, then, surrenders half the intellectual power of the synthetic *a priori*.

I take exception to this phraseology of our author: “An explication of praxeology with an analytic fundamental axiom and with limited *a priori* scope is only mildly aprioristic” (Linsbichler 2024, p.54). In my view, there is no either/or here. Like pregnancy, you either exhibit this characteristic or you do not. A “mild” synthetic *a priori* statement only indicates how far apart I am on praxeology from Linsbichler.

Our author avers: “[...] the extension of praxeology to all human activity remains largely programmatic” (Linsbichler 2024, p.58). In one sense, he is correct. The application of praxeology to non economic issues such as war, or games, is largely in the future⁷. But in another sense, instead of “programmatic” he should have said “problematic.” For, surely, there are vast areas of economics to which praxeology cannot apply. We know it is a praxeological insight that *ceteris paribus*, rent controls on residential housing will lead to fewer apartment

units. But how big will be the reduction? 5%? 10%? Praxeology can vouchsafe us no answer at all on such matters. And, yet, surely, this is a question of proper interest to economists.

Linsbichler asserts: “Of course, in Rothbard’s work, too, the economist is a fallible human being, and critical debate is the key to scientific progress” (Linsbichler 2024, p.61). It cannot be doubted that the praxeologist can err. All human beings are subject to mistakes. But we have to distinguish between statements like “It is raining now” or “team A will beat team B in some sport” on the one hand from the Pythagorean theorem, or that “trade is necessarily mutually beneficial *ex ante*” on the other. With regard to the first set of empirical statements, people are indeed often wrong. With regard to the second state, while intellectual modesty prevents us from saying these synthetic *a priori* statements are ineluctable, necessarily true, no one who states them can ever be mistaken, in a very different sense: that being the one where we may, possibly, be mistaken when we proclaim that two plus two equals four. Praxeologists are mightily and justifiably tempted to proclaim synthetic *a priori* statements of that sort knowing full-well that to be human is to be subject to error. But it a very different type of mistake, if mistake, indeed, it is.

This conception of science as a search for certainty may be partly responsible, at least psychologically, for the vehemence with which Rothbard and many other Austrians advocate their economic and oftentimes also their political positions. Hayek said he cannot follow Mises there, into the realm of the synthetic *a priori* (Knott 2012; Wozinski 2010; Hayek 1943). Milton Friedman claimed that praxeologists who disagree with one another can only settle their differences via a physical fight.⁸ Yes, Rothbard is “vehement” about praxeology, as “vehement” as would be Friedman or Hayek about the truism that two plus two equals four.

Let us delve more deeply into the status of “man acts”. Posit that human being never existed. There were apes, but they all died out before man could emanate from them. It is entirely true that under these conditions, a few pieces of wood could have been found in the formation that perfectly resembles this statement, “man acts”. Perhaps the wind might have blown some leaves to take up this formation. If an infinite number of monkeys pecking away at a typewriter, nowadays, a lap top, could have come up with one of Shakespeare’s plays, this concatenation of events with wood or leaves could have occurred, if enough time had passed for this to come into being. How, then, would a non-human but intelligent being properly interpret this statement. It would be an empirical claim, but a false one. However, if a man wrote it, then it would an empirical claim, and, also, necessarily true, thus, a synthetic *a priori* statement. Any attempt to refute it would strengthen it. For example, to say that man does not act is itself an act, thus self-refutational.

According to Linsbichler, “While Rothbard classifies the auxiliary axioms of praxeology as obviously true in our world, a counterfactual scenario in which they are false can be thought of without contradiction, so they are not necessarily true” (Linsbichler 2024, p.63). But no example is given by this philosopher economist.. No counterfactual scenario can be thought of, apart from the wood or the leaves forming that statement, but, for reasons given, that can hardly count. For, here, such a claim would be empirical, but false.

Saith Linsbichler: “What distinguishes truth from absolute truth in Rothbard’s nomenclature is not entirely clear. The formulation can be read as an expression of the lack of differentiation between truth and certainty. In other passages, Rothbard seems to have in mind truth without exception in our world or the much stronger truth in all possible worlds, i.e. necessary truth” (Linsbichler 2024, p.66). What distinguishes truth from absolute truth

in Rothbard's nomenclature seems a bit more clear to me than it does to Linsbichler. Take these two claims. One, it is now raining outside. Two, voluntary trade benefits both parties *ex ante*. The first one is indeed true, since it is now raining. But it is a mere empirical claim which need not always be true. Sometimes, the sun is shining. But it is possible to deny the truth of this correct statement, without becoming enmeshed in self-contradiction. The second statement is absolutely and necessarily true, a higher order of truth if it can be put that way, since the denial is not only false, but self-contradictory. It is true under all possible scenarios, while the first is only true when it rains.

Here is another contribution by this author:

[...] for the sake of argument let us concede to Rothbard that he has intuited, with necessary truth, that he himself has goals and uses means to achieve them. The main difficulties for establishing the fundamental axiom in a Rothbardian manner arise when one tries to infer statements about the minds of other people from inner experience. How is it possible to draw necessary conclusions about other people from the exploration of one's own consciousness? Since Rothbard requires and considers the fundamental axiom to be empirically meaningful, the term 'human' is at least partly interpreted, i.e. at least for many paradigmatic cases it is determined which physical objects are in the extension of 'human' and which are not. Suppose *m* is one such human individual and suppose it turns out that *m* does not act (Linsbichler 2024, p.69).

To me this is akin to supposing the proverbial square circle. We can posit such a supposition all we want but we can succeed in doing no such thing. That is, we can use "square circle" in a sentence, as I am now doing, but that cannot render this concept coherent. In like manner we can use the phrase, "*M* is a human being who does not act" in a sentence, as, again, I am now doing but that does not render this thought intelligible. The only human being who does not act is a dead human being, and it is not at all clear that this *ex-person* is still a human being. More to the point, he is a cadaver, and can no longer act. But while he is alive he must necessarily engage in human action, or he will no longer be able to boast of that status.

Linsbichler asserts: "Then, for Rothbard, the potential immunization strategy of simply not calling everything that does not act as a human being is blocked" (Linsbichler 2024, p.69). This is not a mere mistaken definition on Rothbard's part. I think it is incumbent upon Linsbichler to give an instance of a human being who does not act. He fails to do so.

Next, consider this assertion:

By Rothbard's own standards, not even the proposition '*M* acts' is intersubjectively verifiable. How much more problematic is the demand that the fundamental axiom 'All people act' can be established as true.

Furthermore, it is dubious how Rothbard's account can show that a falsification of the fundamental axiom is inconceivable... But theories in which other people merely behave instead of acting purposefully can be conceived and formulated without special problems (Linsbichler 2024, pp.70–71).

Let us consider an example. Joe buys a hat from Sally for \$20. How much does he value that headgear? If at \$15, he would scarcely make the purchase, since he would then lose \$5 in

value. Nor could he rate this article of clothing at exactly the purchase price of \$20, for then there would be no profit in the transaction for him. Why would he bestir himself, get off his comfortable couch, if he anticipated no return at all for his efforts? Clearly he would not. So far, we are discussing purposeful behavior, which undergirds yet another synthetic *a priori* statement: all voluntary trade is mutually beneficial, at least *ex ante*. Ditto for Sally. She has so many of these hats in her shop, and is desirous of getting rid of them lest styles change. She values the one sold to Joe at minus \$1, and thus earns a profit of \$21 from the deal. Now, it is entirely possible that the purchaser is indifferent to the hat, or even dislikes it. But there is something about it that he values more than the purchase price. Perhaps he thinks that if he engages in this commercial interaction, he will get a date with Sally. None of this sounds like mere “behavior.” It practically reeks of purposefulness. If it was mere behavior, we could not deduce that voluntary trade is mutually beneficial, a synthetic *a priori* statement if ever there was one. If it was mere behavior, like sneezing or the knee reflex, the truth would no longer hold that trade is beneficial *ex ante*.

States our author: “Rothbard’s attempt to establish certainty, intersubjectivity, and truth and for the fundamental axiom is on shaky ground”. He predicates this charge on the basis of “the conceptual distinction between certainty and truth” (Linsbichler 2024, p.71). But it is not clear how this distinction can undermine the Rothbardian project. Rothbard’s view is, *au contraire*, compatible with the notion that empirical statements can be true but never certain in that their denial does not imply a logical contradiction. Whereas synthetic *a priori* statement can not only be true, but, also, certain, in that their denial does indeed imply a logical contradiction. Trade is not mutually beneficial *ex ante*? That leads to the highly problematic claim that people do not seek to better their condition.⁹

Linsbichler now launches into his positive analysis: “A falsification of the fundamental axiom is inconceivable [...] Maybe humans do not have goals, maybe door handles do, but how could we experience this?” (Linsbichler 2024, p.72). Obviously, this is meant more in jest but it stems from this author’s skepticism.

He continues: “Even when granting the validity of introspection for one’s own mental states, it remains possible and conceivable – in principle – that all other human individuals do not act but merely behave” (Linsbichler 2024, p.73). I cannot see how this move us in a productive direction. As mentioned above, if this were the case, how do we account for the synthetic *a priori* fact that people “behave” in such a manner as to improve their lot?¹⁰

Here is yet another criticism by Linsbichler:

Rothbard’s criterion requires ‘absolute’ truth (whatever that exactly amounts to). If we interpret this as being true in all linguistic frameworks, no matter how the terms are defined in them, any justification must obviously fail. The sentence ‘Murray is a libertarian’ is true if the terms have their usual meaning, but we can easily render the sentence false by changing the meaning of ‘Murray’ or of ‘libertarian’. And to ask for the ‘truth’ of a sentence, independently of a framework which assigns meanings to the sentence, is unintelligibly with standard notions of truth. No sentence, considered as a purely syntactic string of signs, is true independently of the meaning attached to it (Linsbichler 2024, pp.74–75).

Of course, if we change the meaning of the word “Murray”, or “libertarian” we can falsify this obviously true statement. What is its status, without any such “changes?” It is an obviously true assertion, but it is empirical, not synthetic *a priori* and certainly not tautological. That is, it implies to no logical contradiction to say that Murray is not a libertarian. It is even true that at one time in his life, Murray was not a libertarian, I presume; for example, when he was a two year old toddler, with, I strongly suspect, no views at all on political economy.

To conclude: Linsbichler (2024) is an attack on Rothbardian-Misesian-Hoppean “extreme apriorism”. This author mistakenly maintains that the fundamental axiom of praxeology is analytic; that is, a tautology; having nothing to do with how the real world operates. I maintain, in contrast, that praxeology is the study of the synthetic *a priori* statements, economic laws, that, yes, are apodictically and necessarily true, just like purely analytic statements, or tautologies, but, also, unlike analytic statements, or tautologies, can explain and help us understand real world events.

Notes

1 I am grateful to two active and incisive referees of this journal. Thanks to their efforts, this paper is much improved. I also thank Emily Threeton for splendid copy editing. The usual caveats of course apply: all remaining errors and infelicities remain with me.

2 This is the view that Linsbichler favors.

3 Semi, demi, quasi, human action.

4 For rejoinders see: (Block 2013; Block, Westley, and Padilla 2008; Rossini 2013).

5 Several of them mentioned above, courtesy of Hoppe. Another problem I have with this essay of Linsbichler’s is that all throughout this very long paper of it, he uses but one example of the synthetic *a priori*: man acts. But there are many more, as we have seen.

6 Is it predicated upon empirical, ideological, logical premises.

7 We are now living some 75+ years after the publication of *Human Action*. Why are such developments still non-existent? My only guess is that there is such a thing as specialization and the division of labor. Despite the growth of the number of Austrian economists, evidently it has not been sufficient to call forth any contributions of which I am aware.

8 Friedman (1991, p.18): “[In Mises’s view, we] have absolutely certain knowledge of [...] motivations of human actions [...] and [...] we can derive substantive conclusions from that basic knowledge. [...] Facts, statistical or other evidence cannot [...] be used to test those conclusions [...] Suppose two people who share von[202F?]Mises’s praxeological view come to contradictory conclusions about anything. [...] The only way they can reconcile their difference [...] is by a purely logical argument. [...] Suppose neither believes he has made a mistake in reasoning. There’s only one thing left to do: fight”.

9 Suicide is not a counter example to this claim. People who do so seek to improve their lot, not to worsen it.

10 Linsbichler’s analysis is marred by his wokism: In this limited sense, criterion (I) is almost fulfilled, as long as the economist stays within *her* linguistic framework. Of course, *she* can step out of *her* linguistic framework, abandon *her* research program, and conceive of behaviorism in a meta-language. Although, to be sure, there are dozens, maybe hundreds of women who have made important contributions to economics and philosophy, they are greatly outnumbered by male contributors. Why make it seem as if the very opposite were the case with the use of this intemperate language? emphasis added by present author.

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